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PASSIONS

Despite an explosive impact when they began twisting and shouting, the Beatles were not the era's greatest innovators. Thirty years after they disbanded, let's re-evaluate their musical legacy

The not-so-fab four

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Special to The Gazette

Thirty years ago the Beatles broke up, yet, like a broken record, we're still singing their praises as the most important rock'n'roll group ever. They recorded together for only eight years, yet we glorify the Fab Four's career achievements as the standard for all pop groups to aspire to. Why? That's a nettlesome question, languishing in mothballs for too long.

Thirty years is an eternity in pop. Consider the shape of popular music three decades before Beatlemania struck and its state 30 years after the Fab Four's demise. The Beatles' arrival put an end to the crooning "moon-in-June" style pioneered by the likes of Rudy Vallee and Bing Crosby that held sway for too long (despite the blips of Elvis and rhythm & blues). Long after the Beatles and assorted other '60s acts cleared the deck – strip-mining the pop landscape to create an amazingly fertile environment in which everything was new – pop music has evolved incrementally over the past 30 years (a little bit of this, a little bit of that, as one-hit-wonder Lou Bega might have it in his recent quasi-novelty item Mambo No. 5). Basically, the big beat has ruled since the initial swirl of Beatlemania.

The specific enduring musical influences of the Beatles have been viewed with blinders. Perhaps that's due to the explosive impact of Beatlemania, or because of the group's central place in the eternal nostalgia of the '60s as an agent of Great Change. Perhaps their relatively short recording career makes us hang on to their every note, at the expense of the era's genuine innovators.

By comparison, it's easier to get a fix on the highs and lows of other pop stars. Frank Sinatra: sweet if callow in the 1940s; an astonishingly high standard of balladry and swingin' tunes during his eight years with Capitol Records (ending in 1960); an uneasy, fitful struggle with the '60s; and a long goodbye thereafter. Presley's career can be divided between pre- and post-army induction (or, to some, Sun Records glory and Hollywood pap). Bob Dylan and Madonna have consistently reinvented themselves; the only constant is their voices (Dylan's rasp, Madonna's reedy thinness). Bruce Springsteen is confined to his folk-rock-hero Johnny B. Goode persona.

The Beatles are more problematic. They were so much to so many. Their career can be divided between the period of "yeah, yeah, yeah" hysteria, ending with Rubber Soul (December 1965), and the "artistic" years beginning with Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (1967) and ending with Abbey Road (1969). In terms of how their musical legacy is perceived, the scales seem heavily tipped toward the latter period. Perhaps it's high time to put the record in perspective.

Their mythology, mined from half-truths and hyperbole, was summed up recently by Entertainment Weekly in its choice of the Beatles to top its list of the 100 Greatest Entertainers 1950-2000:

"Sold over 100 million albums. Scored 20 No. 1 singles. Persuaded millions of kids to pick up electric guitars. Formed an alliance with brilliant and buttoned-up producer George Martin, the prophet who advised them to 'think symphonically.' Captured the essence of joy on celluloid with A Hard Day's Night. Experimented with drugs. Offended the church. Inspired people to burn vinyl in bonfires. Stopped going onstage – at the crest of their fame – in order to cloister themselves in the fertile womb of Abbey Road. Grew beards. Went in search of spiritual enlightenment in Indian ashrams. Pioneered the notion of 'music video.' Paved the way for Saturday morning's shimmy-pop cartoons with an animated movie, Yellow Submarine. Established the concept of rock-as-art with Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and the White Album and Abbey Road. Flirted with various modes of revolutionary thought. Captured the essence of frustration on celluloid with Let It Be."

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The first three points are unassailable, and enough to guarantee them a heady spot in any cultural pantheon. The rest doesn't offer nearly as much, except as trivia or examples of the Beatles' following the pack. There's plenty to argue about here.

Tom Wolfe has noted that the arrival of the Beatles in North America in 1964 meant "the last semblance of adult control over music vanished at that moment."

The first uprising, by Elvis in 1956, was quickly quashed by his 1958 induction into the army (and Colonel Tom Parker's subsequent manipulative management, virtually hiding Elvis from his fans), as well as the deadeningly conformist postwar boom of men in gray flannel suits. To be an Elvis fan in the '50s, you still had to lead a double life. The Beatles changed that, forever.

Marketing the Beatles, shown here in 1968, drew on cartoons of each one's personality – acerbic John, happy-go-lucky Ringo, cute Paul and quiet George.

"They were colourful, they had great hair, great songs, great boots, attitude, energy," recalled Joey Ramone of the quintessential garage-punkers The Ramones. "They had the whole hysteria. ... It was a revolution of sorts. It was radical."

There was no escaping their initial onslaught. There's been nothing remotely like that time in April 1964 when they held the five top spots on Billboard's Hot 100 (Can't Buy Me Love, Twist and Shout, She Loves You, I Want to Hold Your Hand, Please Please Me). A Beatles song blared from the radio at any minute. Beatlemania? More like a maniacally kinetic life force.

(A perhaps apocryphal tale has Ed Sullivan "discovering" the Beatles in December 1963 at London's Heathrow airport, where they descended after a European tour. Sullivan asked what all the screaming was all about and was told it was The Beatles, to which clueless Ed replied in horror, "What, an infestation of bugs?" Little did he know that the infestation would become an epidemic.)

More than anything else, rock'n'roll is pure sound combustion, and the early Beatles hits had it in spades. They were noisy, clamorous blasts best heard loud. The rhythms were a rumble, compressed and colliding like atomic fission. It's as if they were trying to keep up with their own momentum.

The title of manager Brian Epstein's autobiography says it all: A Cellarful of Noise. Whether intentional or not, George Martin's production had a messy quality – cymbals splashing away, bumblebee bass undertow, rocketing guitars. Their voices were raw: McCartney's Little Richard whoops, Lennon's acid insinuation. (The cleaned-up digital sound in reissues is revisionism at its worst, sacrificing the juice.)

The Beatles' unbridled joy was accompanied by what turned out to be their biggest influence, which was unrelated to musical values: marketing. Their mere existence changed the way the recording industry worked. Along with the dramatic rise of electric guitar sales, acts were more likely to write their own songs.

"The Beatles made rock'n'roll permanent, global, and nearly ubiquitous," write the pop anthropologists Jane and Michael Stern. That statement might seem like "duh" to today's music fans, but back in 1964, record-industry revenues lagged far behind those of the movies and television. The Beatles' impact was almost incalculable, and unexpected; indeed, it took the record biz a few more years to expand its distribution and marketing machine to handle the demand unleashed by the "youthquake." "Their success, more than anyone else's, helped transform what had begun as an eccentric business into an industry that encompassed not only music but merchandise galore," the Sterns add.

Image-making – the "mop-tops" – became the archetype for all to follow, even the anti-image of grunge bands and hip-hop caricatures. The crafty cartoon of each Beatle's personality – cute Paul, acerbic John, quiet George and happy-go-lucky Ringo – became a mold for groups ranging from the Monkees to the Backstreet Boys and Spice Girls.

The Beatles also had an effect on the image of the Rolling Stones as the "anti-Beatles." Back then, you were either a Beatles fanatic or a Stones partisan; the two didn't mix. "The Beatles were a bit naff – corny, poppy," '60s fashion photographer David Bailey wrote in Vogue recently. The Beatles were smiling and lovable, the Stones brooding

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and rebellious. While the two bands were the yin and yang of the '60s explosion, the Beatles are singled out as the lasting influence. This is curious, as you can hear the Stones in almost every hard rock band since then. And the spirit of rock rebellion – typified by (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction and Street Fighting Man – belonged to the Stones. Even today, these geezers remain true to their rhythm & blues roots. (Asked why they were still touring in the 1990s, Keith Richards snapped, "Nobody asked Muddy Waters that question." And later: "I kind of feel like Count Basie ... just running a damn good band.")

When the Fab Four began to tinker with the form of rock'n'roll, it was big news – a vindication of sorts – for those who thought R&R was too limiting or merely teen spirit. The changes were lovable in much the same way that the Beatles (and not the Stones) were perceived as a pop group a mother could love (they eventually penned the obeisant ditty: Your Mother Should Know).

For a short while, they were creative sponges, and the changes were exhilarating. Revolver is filled with quirky and adventurous songs. (When they strayed from their image, they'd inject "Beatlesesque" harmonies that were too often a cloying cross between the Andrews Sisters and the Lettermen. Their harmonies were like cough syrup: a little went a long way, but too much made you gag.)

When they began work on their first record uninterrupted by the rigours of touring (Sgt. Pepper), they teased us by releasing one of pop's most wondrous double-sided singles: Strawberry Fields Forever, murky, electronically altered impressionistic memory, and Penny Lane, a jaunty portrait of everyday goings-on as existential still life. By the time Sgt. Pepper arrived, the pop world was salivating with great expectations.

"Everything was going to change for the world as a whole," James Miller writes of his reaction to Sgt. Pepper, in Flowers in the Dustbin: The Rise of Rock and Roll 1947-1977. He calls this the apex of rock'n'roll, and he was not alone. Partisan Review critic Richard Poirier wrote: "The Beatles now exist not merely as a phenomenon of entertainment but as a force of historical consequence." Kenneth Tynan claimed Sgt. Pepper was "a decisive moment in the history of Western civilization."

That's the problem: desperate to "elevate" rock from the "mere entertainment" of, say, Meet the Beatles, the critics and fans who followed got hoodwinked into seeing Sgt. Pepper through rose-coloured glasses. The platter was the first "event" album – rock's Star Wars – and it became an albatross.

Of course, rock'n'roll can reach artistic heights. The trouble was that Sgt. Pepper was a saucer-eyed sellout of R&R's great strengths – rebelliousness, rhythm, rough edges and roots. This was glitzy pop pastiche, overloaded with British music hall. The Beatles didn't break down the barriers between high and pop art – they merely aspired. Dabbling in esoterica, they lost a vital connection with rock'n'roll, and they rarely recovered it.

The Beatles suffered from permanent withdrawal symptoms after retiring from the treadmill of 30-minute shows in front of screaming fans pelting them with jellybeans. Laying about in their psychedelic pads, they had time to prematurely reflect on their undeniable legacy. They started believing their own hype; their later recording career can be seen as them trying desperately to live up to it. Under their very noses, the swirling times they helped create were passing them by.

The accepted cant is that Sgt. Pepper was the first "concept" album. Yet the Beach Boys (with Pet Sounds), Dylan (Blonde on Blonde) and Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention (Absolutely Free) were ahead of them by a year in creating self-contained works of consistent mood or attitude. (Besides, Sgt. Pepper's carnivalesque "theme" is merely linked by the Beatles stewing in a drug-induced ozone. McCartney said that Pet Sounds challenged them to up the ante, and Sgt. Pepper is but a flailing attempt – save for the masterful A Day in the Life, a dark meditation on existence that has never been equaled in, dare I say, any genre.) As for the "advanced" recording techniques, the innovations of Beach Boy Brian Wilson, Zappa and "wall of sound" maestro Phil Spector sound startlingly original to this day. Even the segue is a Zappa invention.

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Examine the acts that emerged from the '60s, and the Beatles hardly register as lasting musical influences. As far as a song cycle is concerned, the Beatles never came close to Marvin Gaye's breakthrough What's Going On (1971). The magic and mystery of integrating poetry with rock had a dramatic jingle-jangling impact, with the Byrds' version of Dylan's Mr. Tambourine Man (1965) and Dylan's own Like a Rolling Stone (and all of Highway 61 Revisited). The mastery of the art song came from an unlikely source, the Band (especially Robbie Robertson), which added literacy to rock'n'roll roots without compromising them. Ray Davies of the Kinks gave the rock-art song a wry, dry twist. Van Morrison pioneered the mercurial extended form in Astral Weeks (1968). Solo instrumental prowess and abandon was blazed by Jimi Hendrix (or Cream). The precursor of punk was likely the choppy chords of the early Kinks. Funk? Step no farther than James Brown's string of '60s dance hits. Pop mini-opera? The Motown sound bled hyperbolic emotion, and Spector compounded it. Need noir? The Doors. Underground angst? The Velvet Underground.

The Beatles? Their most immediate influence was on The Monkees, the prefab American "fab four." The Beatles were so subsumed by introspection and ennui that the totally fake Monkees perversely came on like a breath of fresh air. Later on you hear the Beatles in forgettable bands like Crowded House or retro-hypes like Oasis or, in balladry, in Billy Joel. Hardly a musical legacy. (Probably the most buoyant "Beatles" album since the mid-1960s was 1988's Traveling Wilburys, consisting of two of their heroes, Roy Orbison and Dylan, one of their progeny, Tom Petty, ELO mastermind Jeff Lynne and a genuine former mop-top, George Harrison.)

From 1967 on, many of the Beatles' biggest hits were exhausted, repetitive, windy, bloated affairs – wretched mantras of make-believe like All You Need Is Love, Yellow Submarine, Hello Goodbye, Hey Jude, The Long and Winding Road. They sold out the vitality of rock'n'roll, and fell for a phony meditative torpor lock, stock and smoking barrel. The images of the Beatles communing with that all-time fakir Maharishi Mahesh Yogi stick in mind like something out of Monty Python. While my guitar gently weeps – indeed. We all live in a yellow submarine? Speak for yourselves, blokes.

As time goes by, the Beatles' true influence resides in the minds of boomer rock critics, some of whom got their start thinking of Sgt. Pepper in terms of art. The convoluted search for "hidden meaning" in the Beatles' songs was as silly as comparing them to Schubert.

After Sgt. Pepper's supposed breakthrough, Flowers in the Dustbin author James Miller decries the rising nihilism of rock (which could be seen as a backlash against Sgt. Pepper's goop). The dream was over (but somehow we broke on through to the other side). Whom does he blame? The Stones. The 1968 student demonstrations were "portents of a potentially murderous descent into psychic as well as social chaos that became, through the music and myth of the Rolling Stones, an even more ominous feature of the cultural form." (Whew! And to think the Stones got dissed in 1964 for pissing on a gas-station wall.)

The choice was abundantly clear – Sympathy for the Devil or While My Guitar Gently Weeps, Let It Be or Let It Bleed. The sad truth is that Sgt. Pepper, the execrable Magical Mystery Tour and the navel-gazing White Album (which was in essence a hybrid of solo albums born of internal strife) were not imitated because they rarely rocked.

Even when the Beatles tried to rekindle the rock flame, it seemed merely like an intermission from their meanderings; the fabled "last live show" atop the Apple office in 1969 was a touch-and-go affair until the last minute. Then they found they actually enjoyed playing live again. (Too little, too late.)

So boomers have foisted the Beatles on their small children. And why not? Songs like Rocky Raccoon, Maxwell's Silver Hammer, Octopuss's Garden, Ob-la-di Ob-la-da ("life goes on – la la la la la la la"), Yellow Submarine – the list goes on like the Energizer bunny – are perfect for kiddies, or boomer nostalgists with a severe case of arrested development.

The Beatles as a pop group? Let it be. As an institution? Get over it.

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